Pepperdine University
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An Observational Essay on the Nature of Success

Rien ne réussit comme le succès
Dumas

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Introduction

I am new at my current school site, which is the third top school in the third largest district in California. I ended up here "by chance" after the three-year Federal Magnet grant ran its course at my previous school in an adjacent school district. I'd been at that previous school for six-years and had some successes helping to raise my grade-level's test scores, one year sending more students to that district's premiere high school than any time in recent history. Then when I became the school's full-time technology specialist, I had success creating from the ground up one of the few elementary schools with a fully-networked environment, five to six computers in every classroom, a thirty-two station computer lab and a broadcast-ready three-camera video and production studio with real-time graphics capabilities that would make most cable-access or PBS stations wet their pants. But in all that success, that school as a whole remained among the lowest of lows, one year even earning a discommendation by name by the state superintendent.

Having made the journey from pariah to hero, I've been most curious at what must be the huge difference between my current school and my former school. What's the difference? What's the "secret?

Five Observations

In my job as technology coordinator and computer lab instructor I've been in and seen every classroom in action and seen the students with and without their teachers in the computer. Let's just say, even though I haven't been at this site very long, that I've most definitely had the campus tour that no visiting dignitary ever gets. Now remember, I've just spent six-years at a school singled out by the state superintendent as one of the "lowest of the lows" with the last three of those years performing many of the same duties working amidst those teachers. In this observational report I will be making note of five areas usually discussed in queries about successful organizations: Teamwork, Technology, Dedication/Professionalism, Morale, and Other (the "X" factor).

Teamwork

A local paper recently published a story about my current school (for the sake of this report we will call this school "Horatio Hornblower Elementary"), conveniently written by a reporter from the district's Magnet office. Besides including an embarrassingly glowing paragraph about my work with the students in the school's computer lab, the reporter conceded that a great portion of our success could be attributed to teamwork."[1] Hmmm, that's original. From boardrooms to sports' pressrooms, every successful manager begins his or her explanation of their success with a few words on their group's incredible teamwork. Hmmm, it must be true because it's in all the papers. But how does it look from the vantage point of the inconspicuous technician toiling at the back of the room while the real class sessions are being conducted?

There are several aspects to "successful teamwork," in an academic environment, that go well beyond the simple definition of "working well together." One of these aspects is the grade levels' internal dynamic: how well do they self-support fellow team members (without outside/administrative intervention). This includes how well they discipline themselves when a team member fails to uphold the standard and how much they insulate team members from outside distractions or hassles. It has been my observation that of the seven grade levels (with seven to four classrooms at each grade level and counting SDC's four classes as a grade level), that five of the seven perform flawlessly in this area. Of the other two grade levels only one or two of the team members passively "work" with the team. The others in that grade level tend to over-compensate for the missing members, so the grade level and school maintains an above-average appearance of "team work."

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[1] "The Secret of " Horatio Hornblower "Elementary School," Beachcomber, Volume IX, Number 23, December 7, 2001, page 5

Very few school campuses have every classroom at the same grade level cover the same curriculum material in lock-step and with the same "intensity." But as the computer lab instructor I need to have this multitude of personalities, agendas and interests present a "grade level" plan that makes it possible for me to tie the technology skills garnered in the computer lab to curriculum instruction taking place in the classroom without having to resort to 40 divergent and disconnected lessons every week. Thus, for me another aspect of successful teamwork is how quickly the team can come to functioning consensus on how we are going to connect one ongoing grade level computer lab unit with four to seven classroom environments. As with their internal dynamic, the same five grade levels turned the corner without much struggle (or passive-aggressive sabotage). Of the other two grade levels, the same personalities were even more pronounced in their inability to balance their "class design" with the needs of the whole grade level.

How does this compare with my former school site (which for the purposes of this report we will call Pontius Pilate Elementary)? Based on observations made during my last two years at Pontius Pilate Elementary, in the "internal dynamic" aspect, three of the eight grade levels performed well, three had almost no sense of internal cohesion and two had one team member choose to not work with the group. In terms of them being "on the same page at the same time," five of the eight grade levels were "together," with one individual at the remaining three grade levels choosing to "do their own thing." I attribute a large portion of this curriculum "harmony" to the fact that Pontius Pilates' low test scores required closer and continuous administrative scrutiny of classroom instruction than at Hornblower Elementary.

Technology

In the newspaper article that I referred to above, the reporter wrote, "One of the most outstanding manifestations of the" Hornblower "excellence is its computer technology magnet program." She then referred to a couple of the cool technologies that we have in the lab, such as networked PCs and high-speed laser printers. Hmmm, this sounds like something right out of our brochure. But what's the real story?

Before I became the full-time technology coordinator at Pontius Pilate Elementary I participated in the creation of that district's "Curriculum & Instruction Driven" Technology Plan. As part of the plan we adopted Chip Kimball's Four Stage Technology Maturity Model.

Emergent Stage

A District/School/Classroom in the *Emergent Stage* is characterized by a lack of formal support for the use of computing technology for instruction. No formal plans nor policies or procedures exist to assure the efficient and appropriate acquisition or use of technology across the organizational. Computers are used sporadically, training is minimal, and organizational coordination is absent.

Islands Stage

A District/School/Classroom in the *Islands Stage* is characterized by the regular use of computers in many areas of the organization on a regularly scheduled basis. formal plans, policies, and procedures exist to facilitate optimal use of technology in both instructional and administrative contexts. Organization sponsored training is available and technology has budgetary visibility within the organization. The instructional delivery system is *somewhat* dependent upon technology.

This stage will focus on developing a deeper broader knowledge base of technology throughout the organization, especially for teachers. Ideally every teacher would have computing resources available to them and library resources are available electronically.

Integrated Stage

A District/School/Classroom in the *Integrated Stage* is characterized by the regular planned access of all students as both a means of instruction and an object of instruction. Teacher's systems support multiple administrative functions such as grading, attendance, and electronic mail. Technology has high budget visibility and comprehensive plans, policies, and procedures for instructional and administrative uses of technology are reviewed and revised regularly. Technology training for all personnel is highly advocated and the instructional delivery system is *very* dependent upon the use of technology.

This stage will focus on integrating teachers into Wide-Area-Networks (WAN) with information exchange between organizations becoming seamless. Student access to computing resources is broad and rich with numerous student systems in every classroom and labs available frequently.

Intelligent Stage

A District/School/Classroom in the Intelligent Stage is characterized by student access to technology as an indispensable component of instruction. Every curriculum is augmented by intelligent learning systems. Administrative functions are automated, integrated, and paperless. Students, teachers, and parents have access to appropriate systems from home. Technology is one of the three highest expenditures of the organization and technology planning is an integral part of the organization's planning. The systematic adoption of new technologies is ongoing with well-trained instructional and administrative personnel.

This stage will focus on the implementation of systems that incorporate expert systems technologies into instructional and administrative applications. The staff is characterized by the critical mass of well-trained individuals. Instructional excellence and administrative effectiveness is achieved not just by doing routine tasks faster, but rather by doing them more intelligently. The organizations can no longer function without technology.[2]

Horatio Hornblower's current technology infrastructure consists of the following:

- One computer lab with 41 networked PCs:
    - Each PC is a 166-MHz Pentium CPU, 32-MB RAM, 3-GB hard drive, 10/100 Ethernet data connection, running MS Windows 98.[3]
- Additional lab technology:
    - One Instructional laptop, Toshiba, 800-MHz Pentium III CPU, 128-MB RAM, 4-GB hard drive, 10/100 Ethernet data connection, running MS Windows 98 and using instructional/demonstration software to share laptop screen or observe student monitors
    - One HP 4000N networked laser printer
    - One HP 4550N networked color laser printer
    - One Canon Hi-8 Digital Video camera
    - One HP digital still camera
    - One HP Scanjet 4 scanner
    - One Overhead transparency projector
- One network server running Novell NOS version 4, unknown CPU/RAM/Hard drive configuration
- Six 10/100 Ethernet data ports in every classroom (40 classrooms), one computer lab (functioning) with 44 10/100 Ethernet data ports, one computer lab (being used as a classroom) with unknown number 10/100 Ethernet data ports (between 20 to 40 data ports).
- One networked PC in every classroom (40 classrooms) 350 Pentium II or 450 Pentium III CPU, 96-MB RAM, 10-GB hard

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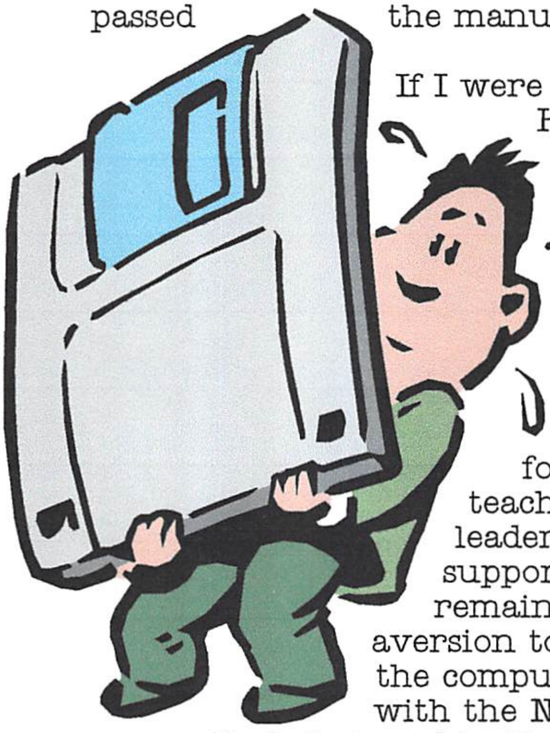
[2] xxx Unified School District Curriculum & Instruction Driven XXX Technology Plan, XXX Unified Technology Committee, revision 1.1, 7/2/1996, Board Approved 12/10/1996, page 28

[3] Current entry level PC computers are 1.1-GHz Intel Celeron CPU, 128-MB RAM, 40-GB hard drive, running Windows XP

drive, 10/100 Ethernet data connection, running MS Windows 98

- Site license for MS Office 97 (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access)
- 32 Alpha Smart keyboarding devices

As a fully networked elementary school site, utilizing teacher and student network accounts and GroupWise e-mail, Horatio Hornblower is one of the only elementary schools in it's school district currently running this way.[4] In terms of the actual computer equipment, the computer lab is in danger of falling below the "acceptable use" district-supported line, whereas most of the networked computers in the classrooms are three-years newer. None of the actual computers are anywhere near "state-of-the-art. If we are to be commended, it is in pushing the technology well passed the manufacturers' original specifications.



If I were to ask the teachers at Horatio Hornblower to assess their "computer expertise" only three would say that they are really "comfortable with the technology" and the other 37 would call themselves beginners. But that is hardly a meaningful assessment. Based on my observations 34 teachers use their computer to manage their classrooms, using it to create lists, create printed assignments for their students, and e-mail. Three teachers (the comfortable ones) stand out as leaders experimenting with different uses and supporting their team members. The remaining three demonstrated a stubborn aversion toward using the computer, period. Since the computers have been networked and set-up with the Novell NOS login none of them are currently being used in the classroom for independent or directed student use. Prior to networking, all of the classrooms, K through 3rd grade, had used their computers as student centers (plus assorted donated vintage Apple Macintosh computers and ancient Apple IIs). Based on these usage patterns and the site infrastructure I'd place Horatio Hornblower Elementary in the "Island" stage of maturity with a strong push towards "Integration."

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[4] This is a Intel PC-centric observation. Currently there are many schools in this district using networked Apple Macintosh computers and servers that run "under the radar" because they are not part of the district's Novell network. As far as I know however, none of them are running with the same level of networked computers or user accounts as my former school, Pontius Pilate, that had five to six iMacs in every classroom (33 classrooms), 33 Macintoshes in the computer lab, and five Macintoshes and one NT PC in the broadcast studio, two G3 servers, one G4 server and over 850 users accounts.

How does this compare to things are Pontius Pilate Elementary? In terms of computer hardware in the classroom and class-of computer in the lab, Pontius Pilate is currently where Horatio Hornblower would love to be in another two-and-a-half to three-years. In terms of "teacher expertise," they are about in the same place with Pontius Pilate, maybe about 1/2 year ahead of Horatio Hornblower. In terms of regular student usage, because of the large number of computers available to the students in the classroom at Pontius Pilate, there's no comparison. But in terms of effective student use, Pontius Pilate may only be ahead just slightly.

Dedication/Professionalism

By "dedication/professionalism" I mean to look at what the individual teacher brings to the task of teaching that reaches beyond the hourly measurement of doing a job. What does the teacher bring that comes from his or her years of study to become a better teacher, to understand why some things work and others don't in the classroom? How much does the success of their students push them past thinking of teaching as more than a job or title? How much do they demand from themselves that has nothing to do with the recognition of peers or parents?

This is a dangerously subjective measure and not very easily quantified, but I would have to say that I find almost no difference between the performance of the teachers at Pontius Pilate Elementary and those at Horatio Hornblower Elementary. If there is a difference in this area it would be that there are more veteran, experienced teachers at Horatio Hornblower and no one with only an emergency credential. At Pontius Pilate a measurable percentage of the teachers were emergency credential teachers and the principal had a much harder job getting teachers to come to work at the school, which leads us to our next measure.

Morale

After the first year of the magnet grant at Pontius Pilate Elementary ten of the original 33 teachers left the school. When one-third of your staff leaves after the first year of a three-year program (and all we'd done is put a new Apple Macintosh G3 in their classroom, train them and tell them that they needed to use the computer), one has to wonder if the problems go much deeper than one can fix by putting computers into the classrooms.

Quite bluntly, Pontius Pilate was a low performing school on the end of the district where there were several low performing schools. And whatever pre-existing factors contributed to these low scores, they were terribly aggravated by keeping the existing administration and staff in place, throw almost $300,000 in equipment and training at them and tell them that they had to turn it all around in less than three-years. It took less than six-months for one-third of the staff to decide that this "blessing" was, in fact, a curse.

Because I had a big part in taking the grant from paper to reality, I won't pretend to be an impartial observer. As I noted above, I'm very proud of the accomplishment of bringing that level of technology to that school and those students, and the possible influence that the program might have had for those students. But for the classroom teachers it added an unwanted level of scrutiny that never quite presented the solutions for the perennial problem of the low test scores. In fact, over the course of the grant, the test scores actually dropped further. And with the lower test scores came even tighter measures, more paperwork, and more district-mandated requirements. Needless to say, this contributed greatly to the lack of teamwork listed above and growing aggravation between staff and administration.

Contrast this picture with Horatio Hornblower Elementary. There is a waiting list of teachers who would like to work at the school. On the one hand teachers at Horatio Hornblower know that they are fortunate to be teaching at this award winning school but they also feel that they must be one of the best teachers around to be teaching here. It's not too bad, feeling lucky and good. Additionally, the principal tries to take care of a lot of the paperwork that the district usually requires (some have said "anally requires") just because the teachers have been able to turn in such great scores. Please note that when I was looking at the "dedication/professionalism" measure I didn't find any measurable difference between one of the best schools in the district (some might say, state) and one of the certifiably lowest in the state. Hmmm, do a great job and get less paperwork, or do a lousy job and we'll add more to the job that you're already having a hard time with. That makes sense.

> *The common idea that success spoils people by making them vain, egotistic, and self-complacent is erroneous; on the contrary, it makes them, for the most part, humble, tolerant, and kind. Failure makes people cruel and bitter.*
>
> *W. Somerset Maugham*[5]
> *1874 --1965*
> *British author*

Other

So far I've covered the two most popular attributes of success that you'll find in every promotional brochure for educational institutions ever created (teamwork and technology). Additionally I've discussed two other attributes that are more difficult to measure. The first one does not making any sense given the different institutions success or lack thereof and the second making total sense given the same success or lack thereof. But nothing so far points to a reason or reasons for this success (and the fruits, thereof . . . sorry, I'm getting a little carried away with the "thereof"s). This measure or category I have called the "Other."

Ok, the difference between these two institutions isn't necessarily the teachers (dedication/professionalism) and most definitely not the technology. The morale and teamwork discrepancies can easily be attributed to the different institutions experience with success. So what's the difference?

What else contributes to the school environment? Teachers, technology (stuff) . . . parents? What's the relationship of the parents with these schools and the larger community and district? At Pontius Pilate a measurable percentage of the families fall below the poverty line, are of questionable residency status, are one-parent families, or all three. So how do they interact with the school? There's a lot of pride and participation when it comes to the little ones (Kindergarten and first grade) and the promotion of their 6th graders. But it drops off sharply after kindergarten, and getting them to parent conferences or to actively supervise their child's homework tends to be a lost cause. As much as the parents may feel like Pontius Pilate is their school, it tends to be more their school because it's in their neighborhood than because they have an active role on how things are being done or the daily lives of their children at the school. Add to this that these parents are quite unlikely to challenge the community or district governments if they feel that they are not getting the services that they should be getting from these institutions. There's a sentimental sense of ownership between the parents and the school but nothing that actively make things better and add to the function of the school.

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[5] **The Summing Up, ch. 48 (1938).**

At Horatio Hornblower the first thing I was warned about was the level to which these parents felt that they need to participate. Hmmm, could that have anything to do with how well these kids do with their testing (and therefore the school's standing in the district and state)?

As a technologist I wish that it were a matter of designing the perfectly integrated curriculum or that having more computers in the classroom would measurably increase Pontius Pilate's students' chances of graduating from middle school and high school and college. Or even that it would turn the tide and make it more likely that they live a full-life and don't end up in prison at eighteen or pregnant at fifteen. But the truth of the matter is that sophisticated slices of plastic and silicon and dedicated teachers alone cannot undo from five- to eleven-years-old what hasn't been done from birth to five. As much as I love what I do, and as important as my job is, I might as well be trying to empty the Pacific Ocean with a teaspoon, if there isn't someone at home doing their part of the process (and occasionally bugging me about my part).

> *God doesn't require us to succeed; he only requires that you try.*
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> *Mother Teresa*[6]
> *b. 1910*
> *Roman Catholic missionary in India*

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[6] Quoted by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. in: Rolling Stone (New York, Dec. 1992